

Syria/Institutional Capacity-Building of Local Councils Programming

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This evaluation was conducted between 4/13/2015 and 6/30/2015, and the report was submitted July 6, 2015.

Purpose of the Evaluation and Questions Addressed

The evaluation of local council programming in Syria was managed by both the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs' Assistance Coordination Office (NEA/AC) and the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) to: (i) Analyze the impact of programs over the last two and a half years; (ii) Create a baseline for future programming; and, (iii) Provide recommendations for future assistance, based on an assessment of programmatic gaps. As such, the evaluation was both backward and forward looking. Subsequent conversations with NEA/AC established the difficulty of conducting robust analyses of all three objectives, particularly given the diversity of programs under review. The decision was to do what was possible in the time allotted, with the understanding that this would not be a formal impact evaluation, a formal baseline or a formal needs assessment. The focus was to be on qualitative over quantitative work.

Methodology

The evaluation used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods that reflect the program logic, research questions being addressed, and constraints on the ground. The evaluation team conducted over 100 interviews in the United States and Turkey with U.S. State Department officials, related donors, home and field offices of the four programs under review, partner organizations, Syrian national opposition figures, Syrian local and provincial council members, and other experts. The field research covered 48 councils inside Syria (determined by a list provided by NEA), and was supplemented with four control councils. The interview questionnaire included 20 qualitative questions and 10 fixed-choice quantitative questions for each, with different questions for local councils, provincial councils, exiled councils and stakeholders. Control councils (councils that did not receive State Department assistance or had very limited assistance that were used as a comparison) used local council questions.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: A One-Syria, 14-provincial council strategy – NEA/AC should adopt a One-Syria policy, centered on provincial councils. The purpose should be to build these into equitable and representative institutions, capable of delivering services, with checks in place against the common incentive of becoming patronage networks. A focus on provincial councils would allow NEA to: (i) take the next step in the process of building a bottom-up governance structure for Syria, creating an

anchor for a national-level superstructure when the time is right; (ii) broaden and narrow support simultaneously by embracing the whole country but narrowing the focus to the 14 provincial councils; (iii) simultaneously address the stubborn issue of moving beyond Sunni Arabs and northern areas (a serious weakness in current programs); (iv) provide more standing for civilian authorities in sectors that the U.S. supports (law enforcement, justice, relief and non-lethal assistance, all of which currently remain largely beyond the purview of councils); (v) provide a countrywide architecture for other donors; (vi) build more fairness, transparency, and community participation in, and oversight over, where U.S. assistance goes; (vii) begin the process of standardizing systems among councils; and (viii) provide an argument for higher funding levels that can come closer to meeting the scale of the problem in Syria.

This approach would hinge on: (i) transparent and representative selection processes; (ii) a predictable, reliable flow of assistance, predicated on the attainment of clearly benchmarked conditions; (iii) sufficient time – at least 24 months – for an organic process to take hold and to overcome inevitable setbacks; and (iv) a relentlessly political approach to decision-making in the field focusing on how governance assistance can win more space for moderate civilian actors and set Syria up for more long-term stability.

Recommendation Two: Relationships Are More Important than Contacts – State/NEA must do more to see erstwhile partners through hard times, possibly by expanding the Support List and involving exiled council members in planning for the future.

Recommendation Three: A Long-Term Conflict Requires a Long-Term Mindset – A long war requires a long-term mindset, which in turn involves readiness to invest in institution building, involve councils in longer-term, more developmental activities, and empower provincial councils as the convening civilian authority on the ground.

Recommendation Four: Rethink Operational Approaches – These include: (i) increase contract lengths for capacity building programs to a minimum of one year, preferably two; (ii) continue the current trend of focusing on specialized trainings inside Syria, with a shift to a technical focus in support of council offices and operations; (iii) couple project support with regular and expert on-the-job mentoring, even if remotely; (iv) increase cash for operational support to councils and provide the assistance over longer and more predictable periods of time; (v) focus more on stipends, particularly for skilled staff, such as engineers and financial managers; (vi) support projects that have the possibility of yielding income for the council over time; (vii) strengthen monitoring through a serious baseline study (overdue for tens of millions in support), support implementers to move beyond output-type analyses, and increase independent monitoring.

Recommendation Five: Start Planning Now for Liberation of New Areas – Newly liberated areas, especially ones where there is a vacuum of power, present an important opportunity for engagement with the councils. Swift action is essential, as is the

ability for the council to show up and demonstrate an ability to solve the community's most pressing problems quickly.

Recommendation Six: Start Planning Now for After the Conflict – One of the most difficult aspects of post-conflict society is reverting, after protracted violence, to the primacy of civilian structures and to peaceful coexistence. NEA/AC should be working with councils that will be more representative of the post-conflict Syrian landscape.